**Is there a canon for Young Adult literature?**

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Below you will find notes on titles that Helen recommended in her presentation. The titles are arranged alphabetically.

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**The 10PM Question**

by Kate de Goldi. Allen & Unwin, 2009. ISBN 9781741757354. 252 pp.

De Goldi is a major writer from New Zealand who writes across the age groups. This is aimed at a junior secondary audience. Frankie, like his mother, is an obsessive worrier: he worries ‘about his household, his parents, his health, his safety, his future, the probability of earthquakes, terrorism, global warming, or McDonald’s taking over the world.’ The one good thing in Frank’s life is his best friend, Gigs, and the reliability of the daily rituals they share, including their own private language. Gigs is a doer, not a worrier. The new girl, Sydney, is a free spirit with her ‘trademark wide smile’, although she secretly has plenty of worries of her own.

This has a big cast of characters, and they are all memorable – including the wonderfully larger-than-life aunts and Frankie’s dad, universally referred to as ‘Uncle George’. It’s ultimately a very positive book, although it’s not a book of easy happy-ever-after endings.

*Recommendation*: This fills a major gap: finding books that challenge and extend good junior secondary readers has always been difficult. Apart from fantasy, there is not much available, if you don’t want to give this age group teenage angst titles. This is a very satisfying read for both boys and girls who are confident readers. Consider it for whole class use with a good Year 7.

**The Adoration of Jenna Fox**

by Mary E. Pearson. Allen & Unwin, 2009. ISBN 9781741756401. 251 pp.

This is a gripping science fiction novel. At its heart is a mystery that keeps the reader turning the pages. Jenna has woken from an eighteen-month coma, with absolutely no memory of who she is. The book opens like this:

*I used to be someone.*

*Someone called Jenna Fox.*

*That’s what they tell me. But I am more than a name. More than they tell me. More than the facts and statistics they fill me with. More than the video clips they make me watch.*

She has a head full of facts, but no memories. But she is soon convinced that something is badly wrong – that secrets are being kept from her. Her grandmother, Lily, seems to want to avoid her; her parents try to keep her from any contact with the world. Little clues to a mystery accumulate, such as the scar she had on her chin in a video taken seven years previously – a scar of which there is no longer any sign.

This is set in a future America where ‘a second woman had been elected president.’ Nineteen thousand people have died in a Californian earthquake. A quarter of the world’s population has been wiped out by a plague, because antibacterial drugs are no longer effective. Genetically engineered crops have caused huge damage. And Jenna’s father has become enormously wealthy after selling his biotech company, which had made a significant medical breakthrough.

This is a fairly easy read, narrated in the first-person by Jenna, so that the reader shares her bewilderment about the situation. Our empathy with Jenna is enhanced by occasional stream-of-consciousness sections that vividly convey her distress. Despite the strangeness of her situation, Jenna is still in many ways a normal teenager, falling in love, struggling to be her own person, fighting with her parents.

I think many students will find the ending of the novel rather confronting. Whether the ending is a satisfactory resolution is certainly worth debating.This is a text that will generate plenty of discussion.

*Recommendation*: This is an excellent Year 9 class set novel, especially for girls. It is a great introduction to the science fiction genre, likely to appeal to readers who may be reluctant sci-fi readers.

**The Arrival**

by Shaun Tan. Lothian Books, 2006. ISBN 9780734406941. 128 pp.

This made history when it won the NSW Premier’s Award for Best Book of the Year in 2007. There was an outcry about the fact that a wordless book had won the award. The fact that the book was classified as a children’s book added insult to injury for some people: children’s literature is seen, in some eyes, as an inferior kind of art.

For those who did not look at it from such a limited viewpoint, *The Arrival* was a glorious discovery. As an artefact, it is a delight – one of those books that is a joy to pick up, something to be treasured, and loved, and shared. It tells a story, without any words other than the title, of a man leaving his wife and child in a country where life is hard and travelling across the sea to a new world, where at first everything is very strange indeed. It is the universal migrant story, and Tan’s choice of sepia tones, reminiscent of old photographs, is perfect for telling such a story. His use of surreal images dramatically represents the new world as seen through the eyes of the newcomer.

This is a big book – it reportedly took Tan four years of work. Although like most picture books the pages are unnumbered, there are 128 of them. Most picture books have 28 or 32 pages. To sustain the story, without words, through a work of such length is in itself a triumph. Most – although not all - pages consist of grids of small images, comic-book style. This is the perfect example of the graphic novel form.

*The Arrival* also won the Children’s Book Council of Australia Award for Best Picture Book in 2007.

*Recommendation*: Use this with older readers, from Years 9 upwards. It is worthy of close study in its own right, but use it as well in any unit of work about the migrant experience or about cultural diversity. It is a perfect related text for the Area of Study: Belonging.

**The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation**

by M. T. Anderson. Walker Books, 2007. ISBN 9781844282111. 368 pp.

This is an extraordinary novel – one of the most powerful and memorable young adult novels I have read. It is set at the time of the American Revolution and tells the story of a young man who is the subject of an experiment. It is some time before the reader discovers what this experiment is, but the young man and his mother live in luxury, surrounded by the young man’s tutors. He receives the best possible classical and musical education. Meanwhile, every detail of his life is observed and recorded.

This purports to be based on a selection of real documents, primarily the manuscript testimony of Octavian himself but including diverse letters and some newspaper extracts. The language is magnificently appropriate to an eighteenth-century manuscript. This means, however, that it is more difficult to read than the usual contemporary texts with their short sentences and short paragraphs. This is a book for good readers – and readers who are prepared to be patient. It took me a little while to get into it, but once you have learnt to be comfortable with the text, this is a gripping – and at times terrible – read. It is a book about the big questions: are all human beings equal? does any human being have the right to own others? how important is personal freedom? It’s a truly astonishing book.

*Recommendation*: This is a demanding book that will challenge and excite your best senior readers. It would be a rewarding text to study with a small group of advanced senior students – perhaps a gifted Year10 group. There is a sequel: *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing Volume II: The Kingdom on the Waves.*

**The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas**

by John Boyne. Red Fox, 2006. ISBN 9780099487821. 216pp.

This is a children’s book that was widely read and talked about by adults. It is at quite a simple reading level and a few teachers are using it as early as upper primary; others find that the subject-matter is so distressing that they prefer to confine it to older readers. A teacher reported to me that she had had great success reading it aloud to an Advanced Year 12 class who were doing the ‘History and Memory’ module.

Adults will immediately get the clues to the subject-matter from the title and the book jacket, but children may not pick up these clues. The blurb for the hardcover edition is the least specific I have ever read: it actually says that it is not going to tell us anything about the book. Again, an adult will quickly recognise who ‘the Fury’ is who comes to visit the narrator’s parents and who has to be treated with such great respect, but a child reading the story will share the narrator’s innocence about the significance of what is happening.

This is a book that cannot be much talked about, as it is important that each reader comes to it fresh. The impact is not unlike that of the film *Life is Beautiful*, which forced viewers to see a subject that they thought they knew very well through new eyes. The ending is both terrible and inspired.

*Recommendation*: This can be used with all age groups, from Year 5 upwards, although many teachers will prefer to leave it to more mature age groups. My own preference is to use it at Year 9 level, when students are mature enough to explore the question of why the author labelled it a ‘fable’. It has been widely adopted for class set use. It is quite short and is superb for reading aloud. Make sure that you read it before reading it aloud to a class, however: the ending is excruciating and I think it would be difficult to read it aloud unprepared. It could be used alongside Morris Gleitzman’s *Once* and the non-fiction text *Hana’s Suitcase*.

**Butterfly**

by Sonya Hartnett. Penguin Hamish Hamilton, 2009. ISBN 9780241015421. 215 pp.

The front cover quotes *The Age*: ‘the finest writer of her generation … a novelist of genius.’ I have no wish to dispute that, and this novel, published as an adult novel, will enhance her reputation even further. It is an extraordinarily insightful and memorable exploration of adolescence. Plum is not quite fourteen and convinced that she will soon become beautiful, confident and mature. In the couple of weeks before her fourteenth birthday, her life does indeed change – and the reader shares every moment of her humiliation and betrayal. At times it is almost too painful to read, except that Hartnett’s exquisite prose seduces the reader to keep going. Most painful of all are Plum’s friends - ‘their eyes cold stones’ – and the next-door neighbour whom she idolises, unaware that she is using Plum in a game directed at her much younger lover, Plum’s brother Justin. The characterisation is extraordinary.

*Recommendation*: This is indeed for an adult audience – for everyone who can remember being fourteen. I don’t think I’d give it to fourteen-year-olds to read – even to the very bright. It could make the experience of being fourteen even more excruciating. But for those who have survived, it is a magnificent read. Use it as the core of a unit of work with your best Year 11 students, and then encourage them to explore Hartnett’s other work. One of the most impressive features of that work is that every title is startlingly different and original.

**Cold Skin**

by Steven Herrick. Allen & Unwin 2007. ISBN 9781741751291. 276 pp.

Steven Herrick is the master of the verse novel for young adult readers, and this is one of his best. He follows his characteristic practice of using multiple voices to tell a story that has all the features of a traditional crime story: multiple suspects in a confined location. In a small country town a teenage girl has been found murdered. The use of multiple narrators means that the blame seems to fall on almost all the male characters that we meet. Suspense is well maintained and characters are rounded and interesting.

*Recommendation*: There are very few good crime novels written specifically for adolescents. This makes an excellent, accessible introduction to the genre. It works well at Years 9 or 10.

**The Dead I Know**

byScot Gardner. Allen & Unwin, May 2011. ISBN 9781742373843. 214 pp.

The Australian writer Scot Gardner has written a number of highly regarded books with teenage male protagonists – boys from disadvantaged backgrounds who are doing it tough. While I have admired his writing, I can’t say that I’ve enjoyed it much: I am clearly not the target audience. But this one kept me absorbed from the moment I turned to the first page and stepped into the funeral parlour where Aaron is about to start work.

The funeral director has taken Aaron on only as a favour to the school counsellor, who is a friend. Aaron’s school reports are dismal: even the counsellor expects very little of him. He appears to be completely antisocial and he has failed all his subjects. But Aaron is very different from the persona he presents to the world. I think he is among the best-drawn male teenage characters in Australian fiction. The story is told by Aaron in the first-person and the reader sees the world through his eyes. And what a cruel world it is!

The funeral parlour setting is fascinating and Aaron’s gradual socialisation, as he is treated with respect and kindness by his employer, is beautifully developed. Aaron knows that there is something in his background that has traumatised him, giving him terrible nightmares and causing him to sleepwalk, and that background is finally, sensitively, revealed – to both Aaron and the reader.

*Recommendation*: Try this with reluctant male readers in Years 9 and 10.

**Deadline**

byChris Crutcher. Greenwillow Books, 2009 (2007). ISBN 9780060850913. 315pp.

This is terrific – a high-interest young adult novel that is sure to provoke heated debate. Ben is eighteen and in his last year at high school when he is told that he is terminally ill. He refuses treatment and decides not to tell anyone, even his parents. Instead, he is determined to live his remaining time to the full, including trying out for the school football team, despite the fact that he is physically quite puny and an unlikely choice for the brutal American game. The football scenes give rise to some of the funniest scenes of the novel, because one of the triumphs of *Deadline* is that it is both delightfully funny and heartbreakingly sad at the same time. I never expected to enjoy reading scenes set on an American football field.

With the freedom that comes from knowing he has no future, Ben challenges the appallingly reactionary civics teacher and insists on choosing a project that involves getting up a petition to re-name a local street after Malcolm X – in a small and small-minded racist town where there are absolutely no black residents. Lambeer bullies and blusters, but Ben is impervious to threats. It is clear that in civics classes taught by teachers like Lambeer, freedom of speech requires a great deal of courage. In contrast, Coach – who can deliver a fearsome tirade to the football team – turns out to be a sensitive and caring human being, who loves teaching English.

There is a range of interesting characters, including the lovely Dallas, with whom Ben falls in love and who has demons of her own, and the failed priest with the terrible secret whom Ben befriends.

Reviewers have used words like ‘witty and wise’ and ‘powerful’ about this book. Ben comes to understand that he has no right to keep the truth from those who love him. In the short period of time that he has left, he has grown greatly in maturity.

*Recommendation*: High interest young adult novels are often lightweight. This deals with the most serious and important of themes in a way that is totally entertaining. It would be a great success as a class set for Years 9 or 10. It should appeal equally to both girls and boys.

Exposure

by Mal Peet. Walker Books, 2008. ISBN 9781406306491. 440 pp.

This stunning work is the third of Peet’s novels about football in South America. Each of the three has been longer and more demanding than the last: this is both a challenging and a very satisfying read. Otello is the black football star who has just moved clubs in a million-dollar transfer. Desmerelda is a famous pop star and daughter of the club’s wealthy patron. The similarity of the couple to Shakespeare’s Othello and Desdemona is obvious – and the consequences are tragic in a world, like the one Shakespeare imagined, where the black celebrity will always remain to some extent an outsider.

This is a clever and insightful transformation of Shakespeare’s plays. The Iago-character plots Otello’s downfall, ensuring that he becomes embroiled in the most damning of modern scandals. The novel is also an intriguing study of modern celebrity and of the workings of the media. There is also a memorable examination of the brutal world of South American street children.

*Recommendation*: This is a wonderful text to use with a good Year 11 Advanced class who are studying *Othello*. It is a fairly substantial text but the narrative is compelling and should keep students turning the pages.

**The Graveyard Book**

by Neil Gaiman. Bloomsbury, 2009 (2008). ISBN 9780747594802. 289 pp.

Neil Gaiman has achieved the unique feat of winning both the Newbery and the Carnegie Medals with this intelligently written novel. The opening scene is chilling, but although this book is set in a graveyard and has a cast of ghosts (plus a vampire and a werewolf), this is mostly a gentle story about childhood with a life-affirming ending. An eighteen-month-old toddler is the only survivor from a massacre that has killed the rest of his family. Bod (Nobody Owens) is taken in and brought up by the inhabitants of the nearby graveyard, and his journey to adolescence is told in almost self-contained episodes spaced every two years, each one of which features one of the residents of the graveyard, such as Liza Hempstock, the teenager who was burnt as a witch and buried outside hallowed ground, and Caius Pompeius, the oldest resident who was buried there during the Roman occupation of Britain.

*Recommendation*: This is an original and intriguing story that begs to be shared and talked about. It is a great class set title for Years 7 and 8.

**The Invention of Hugo Cabret**

by Brian Selznick. Scholastic Press, 2007. ISBN 9780439813785. 533 pp.

This is becoming a standard classroom text – once teachers get over their shock that such a huge, hardcover brick of a book is being recommended for class set study. When I first picked it up and flicked through and saw that a large proportion of the pages were visual images, I was not at all certain about its suitability.

What I did not expect was to find myself utterly immersed in a charming and unusual story. Set in Paris in the thirties, it tells of a little boy living in the railway station. When his uncle, who kept the station clocks running, did not come home one night, the boy quietly took over his job, working within the walls of the station to keep the clocks running. No one knows of his existence, until the day the old man who owns the toy stall in the station grabs him as he tries to steal a mechanical toy. The old man is based on a real historical figure – one of the pioneers of early film, a genius who had made more than five hundred films before World War I but who had then disappeared, presumed dead.

The story is told in words and pictures. The pictures do not illustrate the narrative – they continue it – and they become more and more important as the story of the film-maker unfolds. They fascinate and intrigue. I found myself torn between the desire to keep reading as quickly as possible, to find out what would happen, and wanting to linger over the visual images.

It is a very big book but it is a manageable read. The written narrative is in short sections and is fairly simple. It is also physically a very beautiful book – a reminder that the book as artefact has certain charms that no electronic delivery can match. Despite being available only in hardcover, it is very reasonably priced – well worth the investment.

This has won the 2008 Caldecott Medal.

*Recommendation*: This has been one of my most important discoveries of recent years. It gives students a real sense of achievement, when they find that they have succeeded in finishing such a big book, and it has rich possibilities for whole-class study. Do consider it very seriously for Years 7 or 8. On a completely different level, it could be used with a Year 11 class, alongside a study of early film.

**Interpreter of Maladies**

by Jhumpa Lahiri. Flamingo 2000 (1999). ISBN 9780006551799. 198 pp.

This is a superb collection of short stories. There are nine in all - some set in India, some in America – all related in some way to the experience of Bengali Indians. Many of these stories are about alienation and the longing for home. The stories are beautifully written, with a range of narrative viewpoints.

*Recommendation*: This is an excellent resource for students from Year 10 upwards. Students will relate to the characters’ experiences, while learning a great deal about how short stories are written.

**The Island**

by Amin Greder. Allen & Unwin 2007 (2002). ISBN 9781741752663.

This is the perfect example of a picture book that was never intended for younger readers. Even the cover, with its huge, bleak, grey wall towering over everything, threatens. A naked man – drawn always small and vulnerable – is washed up on an island on a tiny raft. From the first the islanders – large, overfed men with brutish faces and pitchforks in hand - want to drive him away, but the fisherman persuades them to let him stay in a goat pen in the uninhabited part of the island. The book is unmistakably about the paranoia that infects a community that has become afraid of strangers. At the end, the man is bound and pushed back out into a violent sea, the fisherman who spoke up for him is ostracised, and a huge, impenetrable wall is built around the island.

This was published to great acclaim in Germany in 2002 and then in French. It was not until 2007 – and several overseas awards – that it found a publisher here. Greder said that when he wrote it he was thinking of his native Switzerland, but for any Australian reader it resonates with memories of our recent policies on asylum-seekers.

*Recommendation*: This is a confronting and challenging picture book to use with secondary school readers. Use it alongside some of the books that look at asylum seekers, such as Gleitzman’s *Boy Overboard* and *Girl Underground*, Alwyn Evans’ *Walk in My Shoes* and Rosanne Hawke’s *Soraya the Storyteller*. Use as well the picture book, *Ziba Came in a Boat*, written by Liz Lofthouse and illustrated with beautiful paintings by Robert Imogen.

**Krakatoa Lighthouse**

by Allan Baillie. Puffin, 2009. ISBN 9780143303596. 252 pp.

Set in 1883 during the period of Dutch colonial rule, this is an exciting story of the eruption of the Krakatoa volcano and the subsequent terrible tsunamis. It is set in the small fishing port of Anjer, where the Dutch have built a stone lighthouse to guide the increasing ship trade through the strait. The protagonist, Kerta, is the young son of the lighthouse keeper.

Baillie’s research is impeccable and he describes the eruption from the first trembles, including the tourist trips taken by the Europeans to view the sights. They scorn the locals’ warning that something huge and dangerous is awakening. Research into the historical events is informed by an understanding of what happened in 2005. The final scenes of the devastating power of the water are unforgettable.

*Recommendation*: This is an excellent class set choice for Years 7 or 8. It has the excitement of the survival story and the sadness of the loss, as well as great insight into the nature of colonialism and its impact on both the rulers and the oppressed.

**Liar**

by Justine Larbalestier. Allen & Unwin, 2011 (2009). ISBN 9781742375380. 349 pages.

What are teenagers reading these days? Almost certainly paranormal fiction – vampires, werewolves, zombies, mermaids and sirens, pixies, elves and a host of other creatures, usually against a setting of an American high school and involving a good deal of sexual tension. So the presence of such a creature in this novel is perhaps no surprise – although I have no intention of disclosing which kind of creature as I don’t want to spoil the shock that the reader experiences.

This doesn’t, however, follow the formula. And it’s narrated by a self-confessed total liar. So can the paranormal presence even be believed?

No one reading this will ever be in doubt about what the term ‘unreliable narrator’ means. The narrator tells us on the first page that she is – or has been - a liar, but promises that from now on she will tell the truth. The book is divided into three sections: Part One: Telling the Truth; Part Two: Telling the True Truth; Part Three: The Actual Real Truth. Forearmed is forewarned, supposedly: there is no way we are going to believe the stories of a self-confessed liar, is there?

This fast-moving tale is both fascinating and frustrating. The author is a master of manipulation. OK, any reader might be tricked once – but to fall into the same trap a second time? And can I possibly accept ‘the actual real truth’ in the end – although it seems so ‘true’?

This is a very clever, beautifully crafted plot.

*Recommendation*: This has great potential for whole class study in Year 9 or 10. It is a little longer than you might want for a class set text, but it is a fairly easy and a compelling read. It is a magnificent example for students of the novel as artefact: a construct shaped deliberately and skilfully by the author. It is guaranteed to provoke plenty of discussion.

**Little Brother**

by Cory Doctorow. Harper Voyager, 2008. ISBN 9780007288427. 374 pp.

This is set just a little into the future – tomorrow? next year? – and is a compulsive read. It is also very, very contemporary – and, in a period where our governments are daily curtailing our civil liberties in the name of the war on terror, very, very timely. It is also the ultimate teen rebellion novel.

The author is ‘a major web celebrity’ (whatever that is) and the book is full of cyberbabble that was incomprehensible to me – stuff about hacking, and gaming, and networking, and Xboxes. Despite my ignorance of quite significant amounts of the content, I turned the pages breathlessly, desperate to find out whether the protagonist would survive.

In the aftermath of a terrorist attack on San Francisco, Marcus and three friends are kidnapped by the Department of Home Security, which has the right to take in anyone suspicious without the need to justify their actions. In the name of the war on terror, the Department also has the right to use interrogation methods that were once outlawed. Marcus is released after a terrifying and humiliating ordeal – and under the threat of ongoing surveillance - but his friend Darryl remains unaccounted for. Marcus decides to wage a war of his own – on the Department of Home Security and its seriously scary agents. His main weapon is his genius with technology. When the Department of Home Security starts tracking citizens’ every move by the electronic trail they leave behind them (buying transport tickets, travelling in cars with electronic tags, using credit cards), he enlists the help of hundreds of other young people to ‘jam’ the security tags, causing utter confusion.

This is an unapologetic polemic: civil rights cannot be taken for granted, and hackers are explorers, not criminals.

*Recommendation*: This is a great read for Years 9 and 10, especially for boys who may not be regular readers. Teachers may be a little uncomfortable about the positive take (especially in the appendices) on hacking, and may want to counsel against behaviour that could lead to trouble, but the issues about the eagerness of governments to limit hard-won rights in the face of an external threat are very relevant.

**The Loblolly Boy**

by James Norcliffe. Allen & Unwin, 2009. ISBN 9781742371160. 228pp.

Margaret Mahy, one of the world’s greatest writers for children, has said of this new New Zealand title: ‘Children’s literature is about to be enriched with a new classic.’ It has that rare quality of being totally original. The loblolly boy is a fascinating creation: a being with powers that are both more than human, but also less than human. He has, for example, the ability to fly – glorious, soaring flight. He is free of normal human limitations like the need for food, drink and shelter, and he is invisible to almost everyone, allowing him to go wherever he pleases. But his immense freedom comes at a heavy price: he is condemned to be alone and he has no hope of changing his life unless he can persuade some other child to voluntarily Exchange with him – some child whose life is so miserable that any escape is welcome. This is an inspired idea, because it allows Norcliffe to construct a story full of surprises, ensuring that the reader keeps turning the pages eagerly.

This is the best kind of fantasy – the sort that is read by people who claim not to like fantasy. It has as well a sense of timelessness about it. I am sure that it will be shared in our classrooms for many, many years.

*Recommendation*: This is highly recommended for class set use in Year 7, especially for middle- to upper-stream classes.

**Lobster Boy**

by Rodman Philbrick. Usborne Publishing, 2008 (2005). ISBN 9780746090824. 192 pp.

This has elements of magic realism. It is one of those rare, delightful books that you can’t help but describe as ‘uplifting’. It’s a classic tale of a boy overcoming adversity. Since his mother’s death, Skiff’s father has spent his life on the couch with a can of beer in reach. His lobster pots are untended and the family’s fishing boat, tied up at the jetty, finally sinks from neglect. Twelve-year-old Skiff still hears his mother’s voice telling him to never give up. It is a wonderful story of triumph against the odds, driven by courage, determination and a generosity of spirit.

Disney will probably turn this into a movie and it will be awfully saccharine, but the tone of the novel is just right. The story is tender and moving, but it is also fast and exciting, as Skiff battles the local rich bully as well as the elements and the giant fish that almost drowns him.

This is a fairly quick and simple read, suitable for Stages 3 and 4.

*Recommendation*: This would make an excellent mixed-ability class set at Years 7 and 8. Make sure to include it in wide reading selections, including book boxes of action/adventures titles or titles to do with courage or adversity. It will appeal especially to boys.

**Macbeth and Son**

by Jackie French. Angus & Robertson, 2006. ISBN 9780207200342. 234 pp.

This is another terrific class-set title from French. It involves parallel stories – a boy in the present dreaming about a boy a thousand years ago, living in Macbeth’s time. Luke, in the present, is studying Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and begins to realise that Shakespeare shaped history to please King James. When he raises this with his teacher, she suggests that truth is unimportant when Shakespeare has written such a great work. The issue of whether truth matters is the theme that French explores.

This is very similar to *Hitler’s Daughter*, where French uses a story-within-a-story to explore some important questions. I think it is a little more demanding, although the cover does not necessarily reflect this. If you use *Hitler’s Daughter* in Year 7, this may well be a Year 9 text for you. The stories set back in Macbeth’s time are quite violent, reflecting the nature of the period.

Some people have commented that this discussion of Shakespeare’s motives for not quite telling the historical truth has the effect of knocking him off his pedestal: perhaps not such a bad thing. Students who have been taught to approach Shakespeare with reverence may find him less appealing than those who know that he was the greatest theatrical entrepreneur of his day – the Steven Spielberg of his time, prepared to sacrifice truth to please his audience.

*Recommendation*: This can be read in Years 7-10 and is an excellent way of introducing students to the concept of transformation. You might use it in Year 7 alongside a study of selected scenes from *Macbeth* or it could be used in Years 9 or 10 alongside a full reading of the play. Other texts to consider are the play *Living with Lady Macbeth*, particularly useful in Years 9 and 10, and an excellent spoof of *Macbeth*, where Macbeth is an ambitious modern businessman, in Sue Murray’s anthology of plays *Big Dramas*.

**Mahtab’s Story**

by Libby Gleeson. Allen & Unwin, 2008. ISBN 9781741753349. 192 pp.

Based on true stories of Afghan girls now living in Australia, this is the story of a girl whose family is forced to flee Afghanistan. With her mother and younger sister and brother, Mahtab spends almost two weeks crammed under furniture in the back of a truck as they make the journey across the mountains into Pakistan. There follow lonely, isolated months in a shed, when their father decides to go ahead and find a home for them. Eventually, not knowing whether their father is alive or dead, Mahtab’s family risks the journey through Indonesia to an overcrowded, leaking boat that eventually reaches the Australian mainland. The welcome they expected, however, is not there.

This is an accessible account that enables young readers to experience the situation through Mahtab’s eyes. The emphasis is on the discomfort and boredom, as much as it is on the fear and loneliness. Worst of all for Mahtab is her ignorance of her father’s fate.

*Recommendation*: This is an excellent book for readers in the Year 5 to 8 age group. You could use it as a core text in a unit of work on asylum seekers, alongside Rosanne Hawke’s *Soraya the Storyteller*, Alwyn Evans’ *Walk in My Shoes*, and Morris Gleitzman’s *Boy Overboard* and *Girl Underground*. The picture book *Ziba Came in a Boat* is also relevant.

**Mice**

by Gordon Reece. Allen & Unwin, September 2010. 9781742372358. 312 pp.

This is a superb thriller for Years 8-10. Shelley’s friendship with her three ‘best friends’ descends into vicious bullying when they mature much faster than she does. The bullying results in her hair being set alight in the school toilets, but both Shelley and her mother are too mousy to convince either the police or the school authorities that such nice girls could have done such a thing deliberately. Mum is still recovering from a very bad marriage in which she has been bullied by an arrogant husband, and despite her legal training and intelligence, she is incapable of fighting for her daughter. They retreat to an isolated country cottage where Shelley is being taught by a tutor supplied by the education authority as her scars heal.

A twist of fate throws mother and daughter into a terrifying situation that forces them to become assertive. It’s a shocking and clever plot twist that keeps the reading turning the pages.

The ending is controversial – quite immoral and eminently satisfying.

The setting is England, although the book was first published in Australia where the author is now living.

*Recommendation*: Despite the female protagonists, I have had reports that boys find this as fascinating as girls. The ethical questions that are raised by the ending will ensure heated debate.

**Mirror**

by Jeannie Baker. Walker Books, 2010. ISBN 9781406309140.

A new picture book from Jeannie Baker is always a cause for celebration and this one is particularly spectacular. The layout is unique and innovative. The book is in two parts, which mirror each other, and those parts are designed to be read simultaneously, with the book opening in the middle. The left-hand side, which begins with an introduction in English, shows the life of a family living in an Australian city. The right-hand side, in Arabic, shows mirror images of family life, but the setting is that of a Berber family in Morocco. After the introduction, the text is wordless, apart from a couple of shop and street signs in the English story. The lives of the two families are both very, very different and yet very much the same: despite quite different physical settings, the families eat together, work together, care for each other, provide a sense of belonging and a loving environment.

Baker has used her characteristic collage to produce a series of stunning images. Every reading produces further meanings, as connections between the two stories are discovered. This is an ideal text for exploring issues of diversity and difference, suitable at any year level. The publisher has provided some useful classroom ideas on their website.

*Recommendation*: This is a wonderful text to be used at all levels, especially as a lead into issues of difference and diversity.

**Motormouth**

by Sherryl Clark. Puffin Books, 2010. ISBN 9780143304432. 67 pp.

This little book is one of Clark’s delightful verse novels. Accessible to quite young readers (from about Year 3) it will appeal to kids of all ages. It’s a high-interest title about a boy who loves cars and aspires to be a mechanic on a race team, but it is much more than that. Chris’s grief at the death of his best mate has left him isolated at school and at home. At first he resists the overtures of friendship from the new boy, Josh, who tells great stories about his father’s adventures as an international racing driver. But Josh is not all he claims to be.

The economy of the verse-novel format is superb for the telling of this story. There are delightfully pointed comments, such as the amusing reference to the changes puberty have brought to Chris’s sister:

*high school didn’t just*

*give her a timetable*

*it gave her*

*a bad personality transplant.*

The format is also perfect for conveying the numbness of grief and Chris’s need to hold his emotions in such tight control that he cannot cope with sympathy.

*Recommendation*: While this is clearly aimed at readers of primary school age, this has real potential for use with older reluctant readers. There are rich opportunities for close study of the language and form, including models for students’ own writing.

**No Safe Place**

by Deborah Ellis. Allen & Unwin, 2011. ISBN 9781742374109. 176 pages.

Ellis is a Canadian writer whose activism has taken her to many parts of the world where children are in danger. She has written about children in countries like Afghanistan and Palestine. Her Diego books are about a boy whose parents are in prison in Bolivia and The Heaven Shop is about children orphaned by AIDS in Africa.

*No Safe Place* is about child refugees. The story begins with fifteen-year-old Abdul from Baghdad, who has finally made it to Calais and is attempting to make the dangerous crossing to England. His path crosses those of two very different and equally vulnerable children: Rosalia from the Roma people of Romania and Cheslav who, as an orphan, has been educated in a military institution in Russia. Each has different reasons for fleeing and each has been deeply scarred by their past. All of them have learned not to trust others.

This is an intriguing adventure story where the young people’s resourcefulness and persistence enable them to triumph against the odds. Because this is fiction, there is a ‘feel-good’ ending. The ending for the real-life young people on whose experiences this story is based is rarely so easy.

*Recommendation*: This is a useful text for showing students that refugees (or ‘illegal immigrants’ as they are mostly referred to – wrongly – in the Australian media) are not ‘the other’, but kids like them – kids who have been born into appalling circumstances. This will work well at Years 7 or 8.

**Once**

by Morris Gleitzman. Puffin. 2005. ISBN 9780143301950. 153 pp.

I think this is Gleitzman’s best novel since *Two Weeks with the Queen*. It has been even more controversial than his novels about asylum seekers – *Boy Overboard* and *Girl Underground*, both of which were criticised harshly on the grounds that children need not be exposed to these issues. In this case, the issue is the Jewish holocaust: the story is that of a Jewish boy, left by his parents in a Catholic orphanage in Poland during World War II.

Gleitzman has perfected a certain formula which he uses regardless of whether he is dealing with the most serious and painful issues or telling the hilarious if revolting tale of an intestinal worm, and he keeps to the formula here. His protagonist is an innocent narrator who does not understand the significance of much of what he tells us and who finds himself constantly in hilarious predicaments. The adult reader recognises immediately the chilling significance of what Felix is telling us, as he finds, for example, the little girl, Zelda, the only survivor of the fire that has destroyed her house. The child reader with little or no knowledge of the holocaust may not understand it all at first either, but, like Felix himself, will piece together the evidence and come to see the significance of the events.

Some adults will continue to argue that children need not be exposed to such a painful story. I would argue that there is no better way to introduce the topic than this. Like other Gleitzman titles, this is quite short and simple to read, very understated. At his best, this understatement is one of Gleitzman’s most successful features, leaving the reader aching with a sense of loss.

Two sequels, *Then* and *Now*, are also available.

*Recommendation*: Consider this as a class set novel for a mixed-ability Year 7 class. It would be useful to use this alongside the excellent non-fiction text, *Hana’s Suitcase*.

**The Reluctant Fundamentalist**

by Mohsin Hamid. Penguin Books, 2008 (2007). ISBN 9780141029542. 209 pp.

This is a superb text for senior study. It is short enough and easy enough to be accessible to less academic streams, but the ideas explored will challenge your most talented students. The whole novel is a dramatic monologue. The speaker is a young Pakistani who has spent a lot of time in the United States where he had great success, first as a student and then as a businessman. But 9/11 changed everything for him. Here he is in a cafe in Lahore, talking to a stranger. Over the course of the afternoon and evening we learn his story, as he tells it to the stranger. We never hear the stranger directly, although we can guess at some of what he says and what he does from the narrator’s comments. The stranger is probably an American, possibly a military type, and he becomes an increasingly sinister figure as the afternoon progresses. Is it a wallet or perhaps a gun that is in his inside coat pocket? What is his purpose there in Lahore? The tension mounts, climaxing in a violent but ambiguous ending.

*Recommendation*: I have had very positive reports of the success of this in the classroom. It allows for an intelligent exploration of issues raised by the ‘war on terror’: the simple good/evil, black/white dichotomies are questioned.

**A Small Free Kiss in the Dark**

by Glenda Millard. Allen & Unwin, 2009. ISBN 9781741756586. 223 pp.

This is an accessible and enthralling story set in Melbourne in a future in which Australia is at war. For readers who know Melbourne, the most striking aspect of the book is the distortion of the familiar settings: here is the State Library of Victoria, meticulously described, but it is a library that has been bombed and has become refuge to the homeless. Here too is the fun park at St Kilda, with its House of Horrors and its merry-go-round, but with a war going on it’s a place of desolation and real fear. For those who don’t know Melbourne, the novel’s greatest strength is its beautifully depicted characters, for whom we come to care deeply. First of all is the teenage narrator, Skip – a misfit, a talented though unschooled artist, a runaway from the latest unsuitable foster home. As he tries to survive on the streets, he is befriended by Billy, who has long been both homeless and hopeless. As war breaks out, they become an unusual but very close family, as they take into their protection six-year-old Max and then Tia and her baby. It is a gripping survival story, in which not all the characters survive. And it is above all a celebration of the power of love and human resilience.

*Recommendation*: This is a great read for the Year 6 to Year 9 age group. It is powerful enough to work for whole class study and would be a particularly good choice for a mixed-ability, co-ed class. Like the best class set novels, it has the capacity to strongly engage the emotions of its readers who will empathise with the narrator. While it will have particular appeal in Melbourne, readers in other parts of Australasia will understand the horror of familiar landscapes destroyed by war.

**Tamburlaine’s Elephants**

by Geraldine McCaughrean. Publisher: Usborne, 2008 (2007). ISBN 9780746090930. 208 pp.

This is very, very good. McCaughrean is one of the greats. What is particularly impressive about her is that every book she writes is different. This is short, accessible and very fast-moving. It is told from the point of view of the boy, Rusti, who is a Mongol, one of the followers of the nomadic warrior ‘Timur the Lame, Conqueror of the World’. Tamburlaine sweeps through India, carrying everything before him. As the assault on Delhi begins, Rusti – aged twelve – is at last old enough to join the attack: ‘Rusti-the-Man was about to burst out from inside Rusti-the-Boy.’ By sheer chance, Rusti takes prisoner an elephant and its Hindu rider, Kavi. The friendship that develops between the boys is the heart of the story, as Rusti saves Kavi’s life by disguising him as a slave girl.

This is a fiercely anti-war book. Rusti has been brought up to honour war, but he is sickened by Tamburlaine’s slaughter of the prisoners. It is also a book that pleads strongly for tolerance and an appreciation of difference. And it is also the story of the Chronicler, the foreigner who is forced to celebrate the deeds of the Mongols: ‘To a Mongol hero there is no dishonour in stealing from the dying, in tormenting the helpless, in killing women and children.’ But it is the story that matters most of all, with a secret about Rusti’s true identity and a stunning climax where the elephants come into their own.

*Recommendation*: This would make a terrific class set title for Years 7 and 8.

**Town**

by James Roy. University of Queensland Press, 2007. ISBN 9780702236372. 298 pp.

This is an excellent, high-interest collection of related short stories. There are 13 stories in all, each labelled with a month – running from February one year to February of the next. Each story is about a different Australian teenager, although characters who have been the protagonist in one story may reappear as a minor character in another, as the setting is a country town where people know each other. Australian teenage readers identify with the characters. Readers who live in country towns wonder if the author has set the book in their town. This is very authentic.

The book works very well as a whole, with each story contributing to the overall impact. However, it can be used as well as a source for individual stories to study. The one to begin with – guaranteed to appeal to students – is ‘June – *The Clearing* – Veronica’, which deals with an incident in which a teenage girl finds herself in a potentially threatening situation.

*Recommendation*: This is highly recommended for use in comprehensive classrooms in Years 9 and 10.

**Trash**

by Andy Mulligan. David Fickling, 2010. 9780385619028. 211 pp.

This impressive novel is a perfect class set text for Years 7-9. Set in the Philippines, it is narrated by multiple voices, including those of three young boys who make a meagre living scavenging on a huge tip in Manila. The tip is their home as well as their workplace. One day one of the boys discovers a bag, containing an identity card, a key and some money. The money is very welcome, but it soon becomes clear that the bag is much more valuable than it appears, when hordes of police descend on the tip offering large rewards for its recovery. The bag holds a deadly secret and the boys’ decision to solve the mystery propels them into a very dangerous situation.

This is a breathtaking thriller with wonderfully appealing characters. The surprising ending is astonishingly right.

This will give students insight into the lives of the very poor in third-world countries and the impossibility of social justice in corrupt regimes. It will also give them an appreciation of the possibilities of multiple narration.

*Recommendation*: I would use this with a Year 8 class, but it will work with bright Year 7s and it would be a satisfying text for those Year 9 students who might not cope with something longer and more difficult. It is a fairly easy read. It begs to be accompanied by some research into the lives of children growing up in intense poverty. It also lends itself to an investigation of the consequences of stereotyping people: these kids have been labelled ‘trash’. This is an outstanding novel, ideal for use with the Australian curriculum.

**Where the streets had a name**

by Randa Abdel-Fattah. Pan Macmillan, 2008. ISBN 9780330424202. 286 pp.

Readers who have enjoyed *Does My Head Look Big in This?* and *Ten Things I Hate About Me* will be enticed into less familiar territory here. The story is set in the divided territory of the West Bank and is told in the voice of thirteen-year old Hayaat, a Palestinian Muslim girl whose best friend is the risk-taking Palestinian Christian boy, Samy. The book is unapologetically partisan, aiming to give readers an understanding of the daily small irritations as well as the ongoing real fear that is part of life in the region. Hayaat herself has been badly disfigured in an incident that killed her best friend. Travel, even for weddings, is almost impossible. Life is disrupted by constant checkpoints and curfews and the complexities of the permit system. At best there is humiliation and inconvenience; at worst terror, hopelessness and uncertainty. The author has attempted to balance the account with the introduction of a sympathetic Jewish couple, who befriend Hayaat and Samy when they undertake a perilous and forbidden journey to Jerusalem to bring back some soil from the homeland for Hayaat’s dying grandmother.

All of that makes it sound as if this is a very heavy read – and it most certainly is not. Young teenage girls will identify in many ways with Hayaat – her concern for her appearance, her reluctance to become the young woman her mother wants her to be, her fierce loyalty to her friend Samy, and her love-hate relationships with her family members. There is plenty of humour and warmth, with the book ending triumphantly with a wedding, and with an explicit message of hope: ‘… I won’t live in despair … so long as there is life there’ll be love … the past can both torment and heal … I’ll do more than survive … in the end we are all of us only human beings who laugh the same and … one day the world will realise that we simply want to live as a free people, with hope and dignity and purpose.’

In an article in *English in Australia*, Ernie Tucker speaks of a ‘new, successful didacticism’ in literature for young people, and *Where the streets had a name* is an excellent example of this.

*Recommendation*: This will be enjoyed most by girls in the Year 6 to 9 age group. It is accessible and engaging and will allow readers to walk in the shoes of someone of similar age whose circumstances are very different.

**Ziba Came on a Boat**

by Liz Lofthouse, llustrated by Robert Ingpen. Penguin Viking, 2007. ISBN 9780670028610.

This is a beautifully told story of a little Afghan girl taking the perilous journey that so many others have taken in the hope of finding freedom. The story moves from the frail fishing boat to Ziba’s memories of home, giving the reader a rich picture of the world that she has come from, including the fear and danger. There are warm memories of her father but it is only her mother on the boat with her. Did he perish in the fighting, or has he gone on ahead of them? Ingpen’s paintings are as always stunning, capturing the warm ochre tones of the Middle Eastern background, the huge expanse of the sea and the wonderfully expressive faces.

It is not so long ago that people like Ziba and her mother were being demonised. That is only possible if they are thought of as being alien and different – ‘the other’. This succeeds in enabling the reader to see the world through Ziba’s eyes.

*Recommendation*: Use this as a related text in units of work about the migrant experience or about refugees.